

Johan Cornelius Colenbrander (1912–1999)

Johan Colenbrander (known to many friends and colleagues as ‘Colen’) was born in London on 22 November 1912. After attending school in Lavender Hill and training as a doctor at Guys Hospital, he went into general practice in London’s East End, often riding a bicycle to do his rounds. During the Second World War he joined the Royal Air Force and was posted to the Royal Infirmary at Hull, where one of his duties was to lower the radium supplies down a well, in case of a direct hit during an air raid! After the war he returned to Guys Hospital to specialise in radiology, and in 1954 he came to the brand-new Edendale Hospital in Pietermaritzburg, where he ran the always overloaded radiology department until his retirement. He was, however, still working part-time until only a few months before his death on 2 September 1999.

I think he lived his life somewhat in awe of the father he never knew — a rather mythical figure, known as the White Whirlwind, who galloped around Matabeleland with Cecil Rhodes. He became, in part, his father’s biographer, but I believe he was

much greater in his way than his father; but he would deny this, flustered in the true embarrassment of the humble man.

He will be remembered also as a great companion and raconteur, the master of stories, and stories within stories, yet always kindly and careful of the feelings of others. His magnificent rambling discourses contained embellishments and red herrings; they built serious castles in the air, which inevitably dissolved in self-mocking humour. And who can forget his 'And that, of course, is another story', whispered conspiratorially in a soft lisp? One night, over coffee, I heard from him of the plot for Natal to secede from the new Republic in 1960. He told it like a John Buchan romance, and how at the last minute the leaders in Durban had called it off. He had been assigned with his men to seize the radio station at World's View. He swore us all to secrecy, as those were strange and abnormal times in South Africa.

I have told only a small part of Colen's life — the part I knew. Many others will have their own memories of a man who lived life to the full, with dedication and humour. Winston Churchill, whom Colen admired greatly, wrote a letter from the Western front in 1915. On the envelope was written 'To be sent to Mrs Churchill in the event of my death.' The letter read 'You have taught me how noble a woman's heart can be. If there is anywhere else, I shall be on the outlook for you. Meanwhile, look forward, feel free, rejoice in life, cherish the children, guard my memory and God bless you.'

Colen would have written that, too. These memories and many others are now with his wife Diana and their children Anne and Peter.

CHRIS ELLIS

(Adapted, with permission, from the tribute published in *The Natal Witness*.)

Obituaries



Dr Johan Colenbrander